


“Outdoor Potted Plants Need Extra Attention Now”


Keep a close eye on container grown deck, porch and patio plants this spring. The recent dry weather and low humidity is causing pots and planters to dry out faster than normal and stepped up watering frequencies might be required.

Most container plants, having made their spring flush of growth, are in a very vulnerable stage now. Any moisture stress during this critical stage can result in wilted, dying shoots and stunted plants. The premature shedding of flowers or fruit is also one of the first plant responses if the root ball is allowed to dry out. Plants will sacrifice flowers and fruit under conditions of moisture stress, in order to survive.

A Container Plant Watering Checklist

 First, make certain that all containers allow for the downward drainage and exit of all excess water that is applied. This is normally accomplished by using pots or planters that have drain holes at or near the bottom, allowing all water that the soil pores cannot hold against gravity to drain out.

Allowing some extra water to seep through the potting medium during each watering is desirable. This helps to ensure that a thorough watering has been done and serves to flush and remove any excessive fertilizer salts that might be present.

 Water thoroughly, but avoid keeping the potting mixture constantly saturated. The practice of keeping the medium too wet is as damaging to plant roots as allowing it to become excessively dry. Saturated soil contains little oxygen which plant roots require.

The root ball in a container should be thoroughly soaked during each irrigation but then wait until water is needed again. There is no one watering schedule that matches up with the water needs of all plants. The kind of container, potting mixture, plant species and weather conditions can result in different intervals.

One of my co-workers has a saying: “the best water meter is at your fingertips.” Using this bit of wisdom, you can learn the right interval for each container plant. Once the root ball has had a good soaking, wait until the surface begins to first appear dry. Then wiggle your finger down into the potting mixture.

When moisture is felt at about one-fourth inch below the surface it is time to water again.

Again, the watering frequency will vary greatly. For example, a plant growing in a light potting mixture contained within an unglazed clay pot might need watering once a day, while one in a large plastic or glazed pot might only require watering twice per week.

📁 Always water during the early morning hours and avoid wetting the foliage of established plants. Leaves and stems should be kept dry in order to help avoid infection by various fungal organisms. Watering early in the day helps to ensure that the plants have time to take up water before temperatures rise during the day, as well as preventing sun scald.

📁 Know the quality of water that you are using for irrigating plants. Water from most public systems is acceptable, while the water from some shallow irrigation wells can contain high salt levels. Residents from coastal areas should have water from irrigation wells tested during a dry period about every 3 years.

Question of the Week: The ends of my tomato fruit are turning black. Is this a disease?

Answer: If the black areas on the fruit are firm or leathery to the touch, this is a physiological disorder known as blossom-end rot. It is caused by the lack of calcium or improper watering practices. Though calcium deficiency is most often blamed, the disorder sometimes occurs even when adequate calcium is in the soil and is believed to be brought on by extremes in soil moisture.

Calcium, even when present, drops out of solution if the soil becomes extremely dry and is slow to become available again. Blossom-end rot sprays are available that might help, but keeping more even soil moisture on heavily fruiting vines is most important.